

Universities challenged: scrutiny over Gulf money

Recent scandals have put Middle East funding of US and UK institutions in the spotlight

Andrew England in London and Simeon Kerr in Dubai DECEMBER 12, 2018

When Matthew Hedges, a Durham University PhD student, set off on a two-week trip to the [United Arab Emirates](#), he was following a tradition of British academics conducting research in the Arabian peninsula. But as he tried to leave Dubai in May he was detained, held in solitary confinement in Abu Dhabi for six months and sentenced to life in prison for spying.

His sentencing triggered a [rare public spat](#) between the UK and one of its closest Middle East allies. Both sides now appear keen to move on after [the UAE pardoned Mr Hedges](#) in November. But [British academia](#) may find it more difficult to return to “business as usual”. The Hedges case revived western scrutiny of the Gulf — which has periodically been criticised over labour conditions and human rights abuses — and the rewarding relationship [UK universities](#) have long enjoyed with the oil-rich states.

Some US institutions are also reassessing their ties with Gulf entities in the wake of the October [murder of Jamal Khashoggi](#) by a Saudi hit squad. A preliminary report by MIT into its links with Saudi donors and sponsors found no reason to end the relationships. But Harvard has chosen not to renew a five-year fellowship programme with the MiSK Foundation, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s charity.



Matthew Hedges and his wife, Daniela Tejada. Mr Hedges was held in solitary confinement in Abu Dhabi for six months and sentenced to life in prison for spying © AFP

In the wake of the journalist's killing, US senators said they believed Prince Mohammed, the kingdom's de facto leader, ordered the operation against Khashoggi. Prince Mohammed has denied any involvement in the killing and Riyadh has blamed it on a rogue operation.

The debate about university links to the Gulf underscores how the repercussions of the Hedges and Khashoggi cases are being felt far beyond the political and corporate worlds. For western governments, the dilemma is to appear robust in their responses to the incidents while maintaining relations with key allies. But for academics it is particularly sensitive as they seek to balance their traditional positions as defenders of human rights and freedom of expression with longstanding financial, educational and research relationships.

"It's going to make us all a lot more conscious of, and careful about, how we look for money, how we accept money," says William E Granara, director of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. "The latest incident is going to keep us all on our toes."



Harvard has chosen not to renew a five-year fellowship programme with the MiSK Foundation, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's charity © AFP

Confident, assertive and keen to exert soft power, Gulf countries have been [pouring hundreds of millions of dollars](#) into top academic institutions in the UK and US for years.

Between them the six Gulf states — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman — have provided [\\$2.2bn to US universities](#) since the beginning of 2012 to June this year, according to a Financial Times analysis of the US education department's Foreign Gifts and Contracts Report. The Gulf total represents just under a quarter of all foreign gifts and contracts over that period. Qatar, the world's richest state in per capita terms, led with \$1.3bn, followed by Saudi Arabia with \$580.5m and the UAE with \$213m.

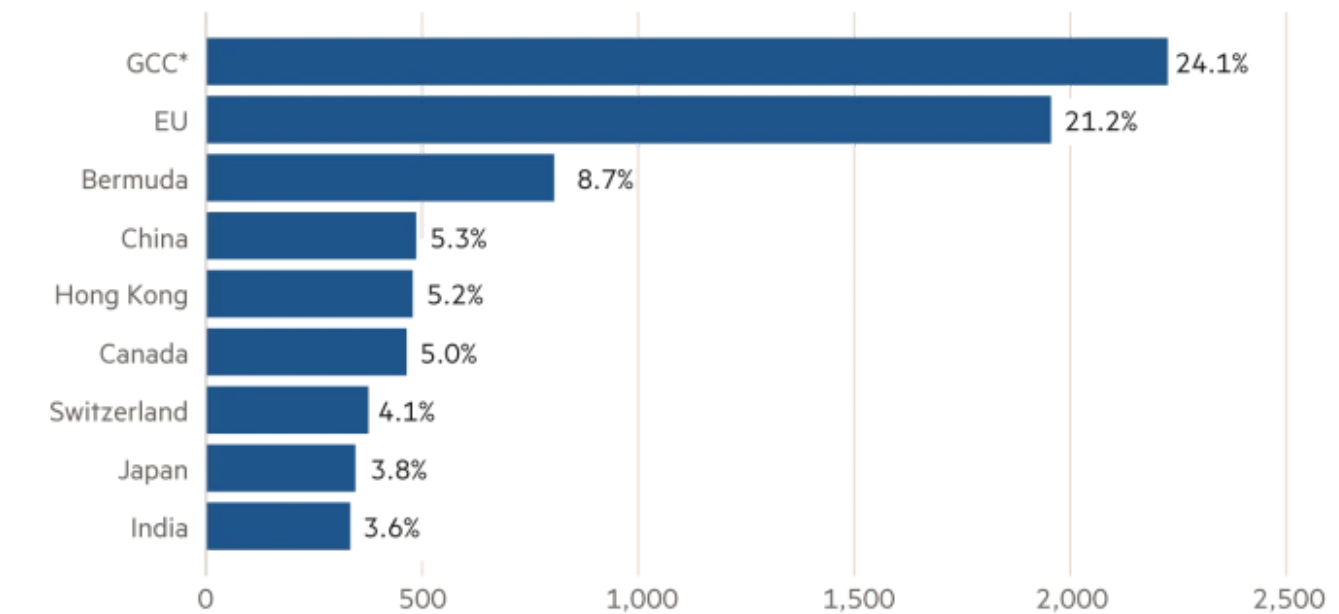
The figures include funding from state oil companies, such as Saudi Aramco and Qatar Petroleum, Gulf universities and cultural missions. Much of the money also goes to student fees — Riyadh funded about 110,000 US scholarships for Saudis between 2005 and 2015.

There is less transparency over foreign funding to UK institutions. But Gulf entities have donated tens of millions of pounds to the country's leading institutions, primarily to their Middle East centres. [Research by academics](#) Jonas Bergan Draege and Martin Lestra, published in the Middle East Law and Governance journal in 2015, estimated that Gulf entities provided at least £70m to UK institutions between 1997 and 2007.

Oxford university says it has received £17.7m from Gulf states since 2000, excluding donations to individual colleges, with more than £6m each from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. About 1 per cent of its total donations came from the Middle East. That also excludes funding for the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, which is described as a "recognised independent centre" of the university, built with a £20m donation from King Fahd, the late Saudi monarch.

Gulf states have contributed \$2.2bn to US universities since 2012

Foreign funding of US universities between Jan 2012 and Jun 2018 (\$m)



* Gulf Co-operation Council = Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE

Source: US education department

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Cambridge university received £8m from Saudi billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal in 2008 to establish a centre for Islamic studies, and gifts totalling about £7m from Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said, Oman's ruler, for the establishment of two professorships.

Richard K Lester, MIT's associate provost, told [the university's newsletter](#) that his recommendation not to terminate its ties to Saudi donors was a "tough call, because none of us wants to lend legitimacy to grotesque actions like the assassination of Khashoggi".

"But the judgment I have made [in the preliminary report] is that, on balance, the benefits provided by the work we're doing outweigh the impact of any kind of reputational support our activities may provide to those in Saudi Arabia responsible for these malevolent actions."

Other academics are more sceptical. "I doubt it will be business as usual," says one close to the Hedges case, "and nor should it be."



The Prince of Wales at the inauguration of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies with Prince Turki Bin Faisal and centre director Dr Farhan Nizami © Alamy

There is also a deeper question that some academics say needs to be asked — the extent to which Gulf funding may influence research on the Middle East, a region where some topics are taboo and critics and dissidents are jailed.

Mr Hedges was researching the sensitive subject of military development in the Gulf after the 2011 Arab uprisings.

“It’s not easy to track. But if centres want to safeguard funding streams, then they might either commission research that falls within a specific remit and perhaps not commission research that doesn’t, or individual academics might feel they don’t wish to cross certain lines in case the funding is jeopardised,” says Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a Baker Institute fellow for the Middle East.

Mr Ulrichsen is a former co-director of the London School of Economics’ Kuwait programme on development, governance and globalisation in the Gulf states, a 10-year scheme launched with a £5.7m donation from a Kuwaiti foundation in 2007. It was renewed for another five years in 2017 with a £2.7m grant.

He says the only time he had an issue as head of the LSE programme was when Kuwaiti donors called to complain about an article he had written about protests in the Gulf state in 2012. But a year later, Mr Ulrichsen was denied entry at Dubai airport after he wrote articles critical of Bahrain and the UAE. The LSE responded to Mr Ulrichsen’s exclusion by cancelling a conference in the UAE.

Mr Ulrichsen believes “a lot of people may self-censor” to avoid a similar fate.

It was not the first time the LSE was plunged into a controversy over Middle East money. In 2011, as Libyans rebelled against Muammar Gaddafi, a scandal erupted at the university over £1.5m it

received from the Gaddafi Foundation run by the late dictator's son, Seif al-Islam Gaddafi. The [LSE's director resigned over the affair.](#)

The LSE also received a [£9m commitment](#) in 2006, mostly from the UAE's Emirates Foundation, to establish a centre for Middle East studies, and has a £2.5m lecture theatre named after Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the nation's founder.

Professor Toby Dodge, director of that centre from 2013 to 2018, says "we've all learnt the lessons of what you don't do" after the Libya debacle. "Our pluralistic, overlapping, critical research is beyond reproach," he says. "It has furthered the academic study of the region, it hasn't in any way led to self-censorship."

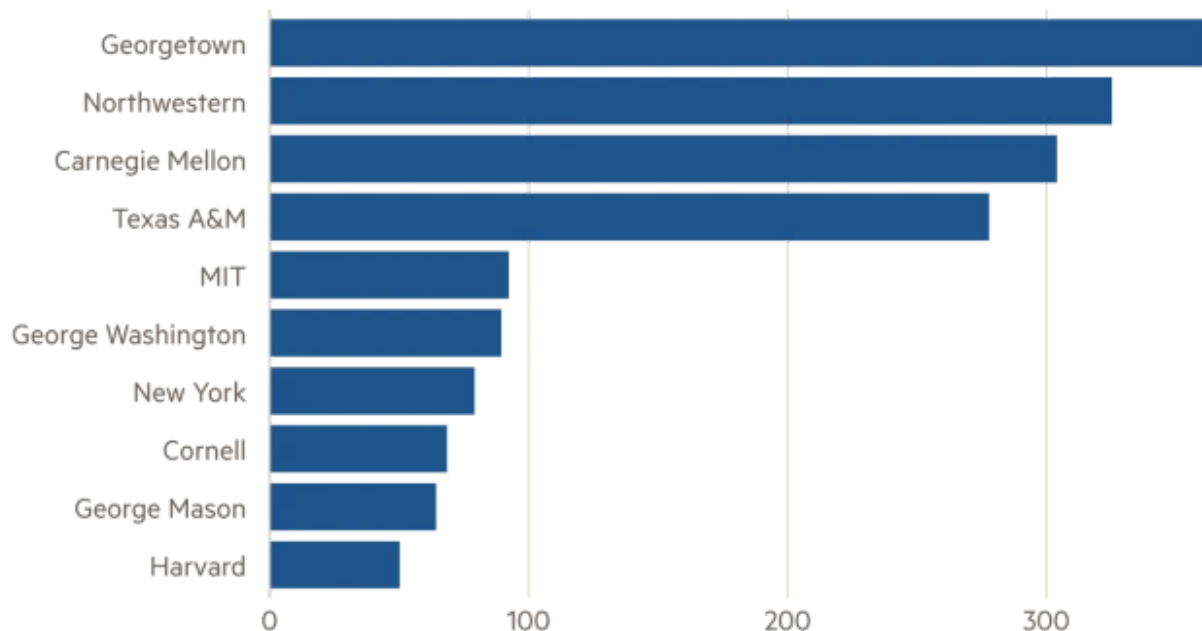
But, he adds, "you have to be incredibly careful".

Proponents of Gulf funding say universities' relations with Gulf states have enhanced academic ties, enabled the transfer of skills and fostered collaborative research. Others point to longstanding ties between Gulf royals and UK and US institutions, with many attending British and American universities, as well as military academies such as Sandhurst in the UK, which has fostered philanthropy from Arab alumni.

"UK universities are the oldest Gulf think-tanks in the world," says Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a UAE academic and commentator, who has defended the UAE's position in the Hedges case.

Top recipients of Gulf state funding

Sum of gift amounts from GCC countries to US universities*, 2012-18 (\$m)



*Gulf Co-operation Council = Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE

Source: US education department

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After the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US, Riyadh ramped up its foreign scholarship programme with the aim of raising the education of young Saudis and exposing them to different cultures. It was also considered an important part of the kingdom's efforts to rehabilitate its reputation through the students' interaction with western societies.

Harvard's Prof Granara acknowledges that donors may have national agendas but says "universities are pretty clear when they take money that there are no strings attached". But other academics believe this rule is not always adhered to, particularly where funding goes to Middle East research centres.

"Universities are meant to uphold certain values and objectivity and funding from Gulf countries, especially those notorious for violating human rights, tarnishes the reputation of these centres," says Madawi al-Rasheed, a Saudi critic and visiting professor at the LSE's Middle East Centre. "They [Gulf donors] are creating a sphere of influence at universities . . . It's an indirect influence, rather than a direct one."

A British academic says that when he published an article on a Gulf state, a senior member of his UK university emailed him reminding him the subject was "a donor and longtime partner for the

university, ‘so please bear that in mind’”.

The academic, who asked that neither he nor the institution be identified, later left the university. “There was no doubt I would have to leave on a moral basis,” the academic says. “Would you accept a grant from a Kremlin official and name a building after him? Obviously not.”

A similar debate has been [simmering in Australia](#) amid concerns about Chinese influence after a series of multimillion-dollar donations to universities by Chinese businessmen with close ties to Beijing, including Alibaba founder Jack Ma and Chau Chak Wing, chairman of the Kingold Group.

There has been little research into whether foreign funding influences British universities. But the paper by Mr Bergan Draege and Mr Lestra found that before the 2011 Arab uprisings, Gulf-funded British institutions were less likely to raise issues of democracy and human rights, and “much less” issues of gender. Instead, they focused more on topics such as youth unemployment and education.

After the 2011 protests, all institutions paid more attention to democracy and human rights, but those funded by Gulf entities “continued to be somewhat less likely to raise these issues”.

Mr Bergan Draege, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, says that does not imply self-censorship or that the work is more credible at self-funded universities.

“The main difference is more of a focus towards the donor countries, and the output targeting that country focuses less so on certain topics,” he says. “It emphasises some of the issues and not other issues [gender rights and democracy]. We don’t know if there’s a direct causal link, though.”



A protest at the embassy of Saudi Arabia about the disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Washington © AP

An issue academics repeatedly refer to is dwindling state funding for British universities. The inquiry into the LSE’s Libya scandal said British universities have to embark on fundraising on “the international plane on a scale that until recently was relatively unknown”. It added: “This scale of global operation carries ethical and reputational risk.”

“The funding climate has changed so drastically over the past 10 to 15 years that they are almost forced to raise money elsewhere. And the Gulf has prioritised through their soft power two things — education and sport,” says Mr Ulrichsen.

In recent years, numerous western institutions have also established satellite campuses in the UAE and Qatar. US universities Georgetown, Texas A&M and Northwestern, alongside Britain’s UCL, are among those with a presence in Doha. New York University and the Sorbonne have campuses in Abu Dhabi.

But not all academics are happy with the situation. After Mr Hedges was sentenced, staff at Birmingham university supported an [emergency union motion](#) to boycott a new campus that opened in Dubai this year. The decision was made over concerns about staff safety and the university’s failure to “guarantee academic freedom” on the campus.

The relationships risk being further complicated by a bitter regional rift that pits Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar, with all sides bent on using their soft power to promote their message. The danger for academics is that their research and ties become politicised.

“There is a competition for influence globally between both sides of that dispute and that is fought out across London, Washington and the world, and that makes it difficult for anyone in academia or anyone else to steer a straight path,” Prof Dodge says. “What I would do is not pick sides.”

Additional reporting by Keith Fray in London and Jamie Smyth in Sydney